

Brendan Johnson and Katie Odhner

Focus groups from home

Conducting virtual focus groups during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond

In spring 2020, two librarians at Penn State-Abington transitioned a series of planned focus groups online after the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted in-person sessions. Despite the added challenges of coordinating online groups, we found that the virtual format was effective and offered advantages over in-person groups. Online focus groups eliminate the need for moderators to coordinate the logistics of reserving rooms, ordering food, and purchasing and setting up external recording equipment. Studies show that subjects experience lower “participation burden” for online groups.¹ Virtual groups also enable researchers to reach and attract populations that are geographically dispersed, less mobile, and more demographically diverse.² In this article we will discuss our experience conducting virtual focus groups, best practices for conducting online focus groups, and information we learned that will help improve our spaces and services.

Penn State-Abington’s experience with virtual focus groups

With a student body of approximately 3,700 undergraduate students, including 545 international students and 58 percent students of color, Penn State-Abington is one of the largest and most diverse campuses in the Penn State system. In brainstorming ways to assess the needs of this dynamic student community, we decided that focus groups would provide us with the greatest depth of information. Focus groups have become a common practice in academic libraries to discover the “attitudes, beliefs, concerns, behaviors, and preferences

of particular groups of people.”³ Since focus groups provide an opportunity for open-ended discussion, participants can describe their thoughts in their own words,⁴ allowing us to collect opinions and experiences that we may not anticipate. For our project, we specifically hoped to learn what programs our students enjoy, how they use library spaces and resources, and what makes them feel at home in the library.

We submitted our study to the university’s Institutional Review Board and were granted approval on the condition that we take steps to secure participant information, such as using REDCap to collect registration and survey data. We recruited participants from January through February 2020 with flyers posted around the library and campus, as well as through tabling in common spaces on campus and promotion in our library instruction sessions. Our flyers and slides included a QR code, which linked to our registration survey in REDCap. We offered students a \$20 Amazon gift card as an incentive. Of 61 students who completed the recruitment survey, 32 confirmed their attendance at one of five focus group sessions. A diverse group of 24 students from 16 majors ultimately participated.

We conducted the focus groups using Zoom, which had become the default platform for

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classes at Penn State after the move to remote learning. We alternated between serving as the moderator and as a notetaker and technology support person each session. During the focus groups, which lasted for about an hour, we used a PowerPoint presentation to introduce the project, set expectations for participants, and display questions. We asked nine core questions, with multiple follow-up questions, depending on the participants' responses:

1. How often do you come to the library, and how long do you usually spend here?
2. What do you usually do in the library?
3. How does the library compare with other study spaces on campus?
4. Do you feel like you belong in the Abington College Library?
5. What kinds of interactions have you had with the library staff?
6. Have you ever used the library for help with a class assignment?
7. Have you ever attended an event at the library (such as Finals Recharge, Research Party, poetry reading, workshop, etc.)?
8. What kind of events are you interested in?
9. Do you have any other comments you would like to share that we have not covered in the earlier questions?

Students were encouraged to use the “raise hand” feature in Zoom to contribute their input. In general, we found that discussion flowed based on this participation mechanism alone, combined with occasional prompts such as “We haven’t heard from [name] yet on this question. Do you have something to add?” or “Does anyone else have a similar experience?” Our goal was to have every student respond to every question verbally. However, at least one student chatted all responses in order to not disturb others at home, and students in other groups added occasional brief comments in the chat, as well.

Some groups benefited from a robust social dynamic in which students built on each other’s responses and could offer specific examples that either differentiated their experiences from others or revealed a common theme in student

experiences with the library. These groups tended to be those in which participants knew each other or were friends outside of the groups, and those in which the majority of students kept their cameras on for the duration of the session. In contrast, some groups were characterized by brief and unspecific responses to questions with little interaction between participants. These were often groups in which students did not turn on their cameras. While we strongly encouraged participants to turn their cameras on in the hope it would promote conversation, we did not strictly require it.

Zoom enabled us to easily record our sessions. The audio recordings were sent to a transcription service, TranscribeMe, which generated transcriptions of the conversations. We developed an open coding scheme based on themes we observed in the discussions, then used the qualitative data analysis software NVivo to code the transcripts accordingly. Analyzing the coded transcripts allowed us to identify patterns in the responses. It also enabled us to quantify the feedback, for instance, counting the number of times one program or resource was mentioned relative to another. Placing responses into categories such as “Policies,” “Event Suggestions,” or “Positive Feelings” also helped bring us one step closer to applying the results.

Virtual focus group best practices

Below are some recommendations on conducting virtual focus groups based on our experience:

Before the session starts

- Involve multiple researchers in the focus groups. While this is recommended for any focus group project, in a remote setting, multiple moderators are particularly important for ensuring the sessions run smoothly. At least one researcher should be responsible for monitoring the chat and handling technical issues, while another researcher asks questions.
- Make expectations for participation explicit before participants arrive. For instance, if researchers want participants to keep cameras on, respond verbally rather than in the chat, and join the group from a distraction-free en-

vironment, make sure this is stated somewhere in writing so participants can prepare or ask for an accommodation.

- Moderators should familiarize themselves with the technology in advance. This includes learning how the chosen platform operates on mobile as well as desktop devices so researchers can help participants troubleshoot issues.

- Consider sending a moderation guide to participants shortly before the session starts. Though spontaneity and flexibility are valued in a focus group setting, having a visual aid that outlines the conversation can help participants follow along with the discussion and stay engaged. This also benefits second-language speakers and students with disabilities who may face challenges following an unstructured conversation among multiple speakers.

- Set up and test live captioning for the focus groups, if available.

- Make a detailed plan for delivering incentives remotely.

During the session

- Once participants arrive, take some time to orient them not only to the purpose and goals of the session, but also to the platform and etiquette for online conversations. For instance, demonstrate how to use the raise hand and unmute features.

- Adjust settings so you can view all participants. This can help you connect with participants and direct follow-up questions appropriately.

- Encourage participants to engage with each other's responses. Group discussions can be challenging in a remote setting. Follow-up questions provide structure to help participants build on others' responses. Examples include, "Has anyone had a similar experience?" and "I see you shaking your head. Do you have a different perspective?"

After the session

- Follow up in an email to thank participants for their time and ensure they know how or where to collect incentives.

What we learned

The focus groups generated an informative and actionable body of information that helped us understand how students are using our spaces,

how they feel about our policies, and how they might be served by our programs. This information is useful for evaluating, supporting, or justifying decisions around library spaces and policies. Below are three examples around noise concerns, programming, and staff interactions that are among our top takeaways from the focus groups.

We learned that students appreciate having a variety of spaces available in the library, including spaces for socializing, collaboration, and individual study. They indicated that it is important to have a flexible noise policy that allows for all the activities described above. However, most students reported using the library primarily for studying and other academic activities, and many also felt that the library is too loud at times. This aligned with staff perceptions of a "noise problem" in the library. We plan on addressing these concerns about the noise policies by reexamining the use of the library's space to ensure there are dedicated areas where students can feel comfortable talking and studying without disruption.

Student input around events affirmed many of our programming choices and generated fresh ideas for new library events. Popular library events include finals de-stress programs and poetry readings. Students also mentioned study events, such as Research Parties and Nights Against Procrastination. We look forward to using the students' feedback to develop a series of new and diverse library programs, with special emphasis on stress-relieving events as well as those that provide the opportunity to explore the diverse cultures of our student populations.

Students spoke enthusiastically about interactions with library staff, especially student workers. The few negative interactions which they described stemmed from enforcement of food and noise policies, especially in cases where students felt they had been unfairly targeted or were previously unaware of the policies. The experiences students described lead us to rethink our food policy and reconsider how we handle interactions around enforcement. Overall, participants' image of the library was positive. In

(continues on page 268)

ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/08/15/scholarly-communications-shouldnt-just-be-open-but-non-profit-too/.

7. Alejandro Posada and George Chen, "Inequality in knowledge production: The integration of academic infrastructure by big publishers," in L. Chan and P. Mounier (eds.), *ELPUB 2018*, <https://doi.org/10.4000/proceedings.elpub.2018.30>. I recommend readers seek out figure 5, captioned "Elsevier Presence Throughout the Lifecycle," which depicts a suite of research, publishing, and evaluation services acquired by Elsevier (bepress, Plum, SSRN, etc.).

8. Laura Sydell, "DIY tractor repair runs afoul of copyright law," *All Tech Considered*, August 17, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2015/08/17/432601480/diy-tractor-repair-runs-afoul-of-copyright-law>.

9. Marcin Jakubowski, transcript of "Open-sourced blueprints for civilization," TED, https://www.ted.com/talks/marcin_jakubowski_open_sourced_blueprints_for_civilization/transcript.

10. Jeroen Bosman and Bianca Kramer, "Workflows," *Innovations in Scholarly Communi-*

cation, February 17, 2018, <https://101innovations.wordpress.com/workflows/>. I recommend readers seek out the image from Bosman and Kramer that depicts the narrow path of open science tools (hypothes.is, ORCID, Zotero, etc.) scholars among a much wider map of proprietary products.

11. "Prizes as an Alternative to Patents," Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, April 19, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prizes_as_an_alternative_to_patents.

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13. David W. Lewis, Lori Goetsch, Diane Graves, and Mike Roy, "Funding community controlled open infrastructure for scholarly communication: The 2.5% commitment initiative," *C&RL News*, 79(3), 133, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.79.3.133>.

14. Cameron Neylon, "Against the 2.5% Commitment," *Science In The Open*, January 5, 2018, <https://cameronneylon.net/blog/against-the-2-5-commitment/>. *ZN*

(Focus groups from home, continued from page 260)

addition, students consistently expressed appreciation that librarians were seeking their input, leading us to believe that the focus groups themselves worked to build the library's reputation and goodwill among our users.

Conclusions

Our experience with virtual focus groups demonstrates their value, but also their unique character that should be accounted for both in the planning and the administration of the sessions. The ability to connect remotely with students allows librarians to reach a larger portion of the target population and provides the flexibility to structure sessions to meet varied needs. Captioning and other adaptive technologies enable libraries to invite feedback from students who may be unable to participate in an in-person focus group. As online learning continues to grow and virtual library services expand, engaging in constructive dialogues with patrons who have never set foot in the physical library offers valuable opportunities

to assess shifting needs and create positive points of contact with patrons near and far.

Notes

1. Douglas J. Rupert, Jon A. Poehlman, Jennifer J. Hayes, Sarah E. Ray, and Rebecca R. Moultrie, "Virtual Versus In-Person Focus Groups: Comparison of Costs, Recruitment, and Participant Logistics," *Journal of Medical Internet Research* 19, no. 3 (2017): 15, <https://doi.org/10.2196/jmir.6980>.

2. David W. Stewart and Prem Shamdasani, "Online Focus Groups," *Journal of Advertising* 46, no. 1 (2017): 48–60, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2016.1252288>.

3. William H. Weare, "Focus Group Research in the Academic Library: An Overview of the Methodology," *Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in Libraries* 2, no. 1 (2013): 48.

4. Vicki Young, "Focus on Focus Groups," *C&RL News* 54, no. 7 (July/August 1993): 391, <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.54.7.391>. *ZN*